

Proper 15, Year C

8/14/2016

[Jeremiah 23:23-29](#)[Psalm 82](#)[Hebrews 11:29—12:2](#)[Luke 12:49-56](#)**Faith & Fun!**

“Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. . . .” This verse from the reading from Hebrews has come to mean a lot to me. About five years ago now I started running. Well, let me rephrase that, I *started* walking. At that time in my life I had been experiencing a lot of unusual health problems, and I decided it was time to start being a better steward of my body. I began to watch what I ate, trying to have more fruits and vegetables, and I began to exercise, which consisted of some yoga and walking. After a couple of months of walking every morning I really started to notice the effects. The weight was coming off. And I began to wonder if it was possible for me to run. I know, crazy, right? Who wants to run? *On purpose!*

Catt bought me a book about completing a 13-week walk-run program. According to the author, finishing the program in the book would leave you able to run a 10k—6.2 miles. Could I really run 6.2 miles in my late 30s having never run around the block in my life? I had the book, so I decided to give it a try. What did I have to lose except about 50 plus pounds? About 17 weeks later due to some starts and stops, and an injury, I actually did it. I ran 6.2 miles! The next year I entered and completed the Crescent City Classic, which I’ve done a few times now.

Running an actual race was exhilarating for me, one because I was so proud of myself for getting to that point, but also because I had never run with other people before. All my training was done alone. Running with others was a completely different experience. I found that having the others around me motivated me, it pushed me. I've always run my best times—not that they're ever that great, mind you—during races. Having the other people around me is what makes the difference.

That's why the verse from Hebrews became important to me. I started saying it to myself before every 5 or 10k that I run. As I stand there surrounded by all these people participating in the same act, it just fits: "Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith." It also keeps me mindful of something essential about the Christian life: it's not easy, nor is it supposed to be. It requires commitment, sacrifice, and perseverance.

Our readings today want us to remember these great challenges of the Christian life. The truth is, though, none of the readings we've heard this morning make a life of faith sound as fun as running 6.2 miles. First, Jeremiah's literally giving us fire and brimstone: "Is not my word like fire, says the Lord, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?" Then, the author of the letter to the Hebrews really sells new converts on the faith, saying that some Christians "suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented—of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves

and holes in the ground.” Yeah, Christianity! Then there’s Luke’s gospel, where Jesus sounds plum un-Jesus-like as the Prince of Peace tells us he’s not come to bring peace, but division, even with those we love most—our families. These readings are accompanied well by the hymn we’ll sing at communion that says, “The peace of God, it is no peace, but strife closed in the sod. Yet let us pray for but one thing—the marvelous peace of God.” Wah, wah, wah. Happy Rally Sunday! 6.2 miles anyone?

There really isn’t any getting around it, I’m afraid. The Bible is challenging. The words of Jesus are challenging. A life of faith, if we’re doing it right, is challenging. And that’s the way it oughta be. “Nothing,” my dad use to say, “nothing worth doing is easy.” It’s not unlike making a decision to get healthy. Once you decide you have to commit, you have to be willing to make sacrifices, and you have to persevere. Think about all the Olympians we have had such joy watching this week. What they’ve had to do is far and above my piddling 6.2 miles. Those are people who really know commitment, sacrifice, and perseverance. They train for hours on end day after day, week after week, month after month. They give up time with their families and friends, they give up a normal social life. They give up pizza!

A pastor friend of mine, far wiser than me, wrote a wonderful blog post the other day about watching Michael Phelps swim the 200m butterfly. For him, watching that event became a reflection on the life of Christian discipleship. He writes,

What if we, the people of God, were as devoted to carrying out what Christ told us to do as our way of life (to love the Lord our God with all that we have and our neighbors as ourselves) [as Michael Phelps is to his craft]? How much would our lives change? How much would our church change? How much would our families change? How much might the world change? I am not sure we can imagine. I do know this – Christ did not call us to this way of life if he did not expect us to follow this way. . . . If Michael Phelps reached for excuses to not train the way you and I

justify our excuses for not loving the Lord our God with everything we have and our neighbors as ourselves, there is no way we would have been treated to [this week's] glory.¹

Let's imagine, as he says. What would it be like to truly live into our lives of faith? What would it be like for us to imagine a better world, and to live into that vision? That's exactly what the author of the letter to the Hebrews is inviting us to do: to look forward in hopeful imagination. Now, the letter on one level is pointing us backward. The author says, "Remember all those great heroes of our faith? All those people you look up to?" Like looking back at Olympians past who paved the way for those Olympians in Rio in 2016. Without their world records, without their many victories, what would today's Olympians have to strive for? Look at the heroes of our faith, says this author. Look at the Judges like Gideon, Barak, Samson; look at King David; look at Samuel and all the other prophets. God took imperfect people like them, people even like Rahab the prostitute, and used them to do great things. And what about those nameless ones who failed? Who gave everything for what they believed in, some being persecuted, tortured, even killed for what they believed in, even though they would never see the fruits of their labor. Be inspired by them! They met the challenged, and that great cloud of victors and failures stands behind you rooting you on along the road of your journey! The author is pointing us back, only so that we be inspired to do what? Look. Forward. Trusting in the God who was there supporting them whether they won or lost.

You remember Missy Franklin, I'm sure. She was the darling of swimming at the 2012 London Olympics. She won multiple gold medals, and she was only 17. You may

¹ Lamar Oliver, "Michael Phelps' 200m Butterfly And Discipleship," *More Grist for the Mill* (blog), accessed August 10, 2016, <http://www.lamaroliver.com/2016/08/10/michael-phelps-200m-butterfly-and-discipleship/>.

know she hasn't made much of a splash in Rio (no pun intended). She has one gold medal from the 400m team relay, but no medals of her own. She's done very poorly. Yesterday, she posted this on Facebook, quoting Proverbs: "'Trust in the Lord with all of your heart, do not depend on your own understanding.' I understand so very little about this past week, about how many sacrifices and endless hours of hard work would leave me so far behind where I thought I was capable of being. But understanding will not bring me peace. Peace is knowing that I did everything I possibly could have done, that something beautiful will come out of this, and that I will come back stronger than ever before."² "The peace of God, it is no peace." Sometimes, all our hard work does not pay off. This is hard for us to comprehend in a culture of the good ol' protestant work ethic that says hard work always win the day. Honestly, a lot of people work really hard, and can't seem to get ahead. Franklin's problems are really pretty small problems compared to many, but I certainly understand why this is painful for her, as I'm sure you can, too. But I'm struck by her Hebrews-like faith of trusting that God is with her even (and perhaps especially) in the losing. Hebrews reminds us that Jesus certainly did not look like a winner as he endured the cross. But, then again, through the promises of God, we know the rest of the story. She's looking forward. She's imagining a hopeful future.

One commentator on this passage from Hebrews writes, "God wants us to depend on God for our salvation. Faith in this passage is not about our trusting ourselves. Trust is outwardly focused. We trust the God who stayed true to our ancestors in faith and will stay true to us. . . . We do well to focus on the idea that we have a realistic faith for our

² Missy Franklin, accessed August 13, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/MissyFranklinFans/>.

future because of what God has done in the past.” We are a people who trust in God for our future. We look ahead in hope.³

That looking ahead? It takes a little imagination. While our salvation is a gift from God, that doesn't mean we aren't called to participate in helping to work it out “with fear and trembling,” as St. Paul says. God will be with us, and wants us to hopefully imagine a better future for ourselves personally, and for our world. But in order for it to get here, we have to do what our ancestors did: dig in with commitment, sacrifice, and perseverance. “Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. . . .”

Nothing worth doing is easy. Faith ain't easy. The good news is it's not something you have to do alone! So. The question now is simple. Are you up for a challenge?

³ David E. Gray, *Feasting on the Word (Kindle Edition)*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, *Year C, Volume 3: Pentecost and Season after Pentecost 1 (Propers 3-16)*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), Loc. 12869-12881.

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